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Warfare: Determined Hanoi

Memo Found Foe Stronger in '69 Than '65

By Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writer

The military situation in Vietnam outlined to President Nixon by his top military and civilian advisers early in 1969 included a Pentagon assessment that Hanoi could continue to sustain very heavy troop losses for "at least the next several years" in its war against the South.

It also included an assessment that the massive U.S. bombing campaign against North Vietnam during 1965-68, while inflicting a considerable toll on the North, may have actually stiffened the enemy's will and even its capacity to pursue the fight.

The Pentagon's civilian hierarchy was joined in this critical judgment by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The views of these agencies—as well as contrary assessments offered by top U.S. military commanders in Washington, Honolulu and Saigon—are contained in the responses of various arms of government to a government survey on Vietnam conducted by the Nixon administration immediately after taking office.

Yesterday, The Washington Post published a summary of the survey carried out by the President's National Security Council. Additional documents that provide more detail about the specific views of the military, CIA, State and Defense Departments have also been made available.

"The bombing undoubtedly had adverse effects on the people of North Vietnam," the Pentagon response says. "Individual citizens suffered many hardships ... food was rationed ... consumer goods were scarce ... air raid warnings disrupted lives and forced many to leave their homes. Moreover, the report states, 'it has been estimated that approximately 52,000 civilians were killed in North Vietnam by U.S. air strikes.'"

"Still," the document continues, "there is no evidence

to suggest that these hardships reduced to a critical level North Vietnam's willingness or resolve to continue the conflict. On the contrary, the bombing actually may have hardened the attitude of the people and rallied them behind the government's programs."

Ironically, the report says "there is some evidence ... indicating that morale and support for the war in North Vietnam has declined significantly since the bombing halt" in November, 1968.

It is also noted, however, that "whatever their feelings about the war, the people of North Vietnam have lacked either the will or the means to make any dissatisfaction evident."

Asked for their views on the effects of the bombing on North Vietnam's economy, the Pentagon replied that "while air strikes destroyed about \$770 million worth of capital stock, military facilities and current production, North Vietnam received about \$3 billion worth of economic and military aid from Communist-bloc countries."

"Thus, in terms of total economic and military resources available to support the war," the document states, "North Vietnam is better off today (early 1969) than it was in 1965."

Even though the bombing of the North drained off roughly one-half million people for such things as road and rail repair and 110,000 soldiers for air defense, the report states that "the enemy has access to sufficient manpower to meet his replenishment needs for at least the next several years, even at the high 1968 (annual) loss rate of about 291,000 men."

Hanoi's eligible manpower pool was put at 1.8 million men, though combat losses in the South had caused expansion of the eligible draft age and sending men South with less training than usual. On the effectiveness of U.S. bombing against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, the

Pentagon cites military estimates of about 95 tons of supplies destroyed each day on the trail between November 1968 and the conclusion of the study.

But, they add, "while this is impressive, it is not really what counts. The critical factor is the amount that reaches South Vietnam ... and since we have no control over imports to North Vietnam or inputs to Laos, it appears that the enemy can continue to push sufficient supplies through Laos to South Vietnam in spite of relatively heavy losses inflicted by air attacks."

It is not known whether those 1969 assessments are applicable to the Nixon administration and the current bombing in response to Hanoi's invasion across the DMZ. But they are becoming an issue between the President and his critics on U.S. war policy.

Yesterday, Sen. Mike Gravel (D-Alaska) attempted to enter the NSC document into the public record on the Senate floor, charging that the bombing policy which he said had been proven wrong in 1969 was now being reinstated.

Asked to comment on Gravel's charges, State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray III said he didn't think such charges were "fair or accurate criticism."

The earlier analysis of the effects of the bombing, he said, "covers a situation at a different time and under different circumstances. What the North Vietnamese Army has now faced us with is something quite different from what was essentially small scale or guerrilla warfare. In adopting tactics which are more conventional ... much larger ... units including tanks and heavy artillery, they offer individual targets which were rarely, if ever, available in earlier years ... They have made themselves more heavily dependent on logistical and resupply facilities, more accessible to retaliation from the air."

Bray was also asked if he thought another critical judgment made in the 1969 survey "holds true today": the assessment that "all agencies agree that South Vietnam's armed forces could not, either now or even when fully modernized, handle both the Vietcong and a sizeable level of North Vietnamese Army forces without U.S. combat support in the form of air, helicopters, artillery, logistics and some ground forces."

Bray said "we'll have a clearer idea when the offensive ends ... the South Vietnamese are better equipped and better able to acquit themselves well on the battlefield now than at that (earlier) time ... that has been the whole purpose of Vietnamization," including the withdrawal of American ground forces.

There is no plan, however, to withdraw all American air forces from Thailand and Guam or naval forces from offshores.

Wide Differences Noted

As the summary to the huge NSC survey pointed out, the views among the Vietnam specialists within the Federal bureaucracy were "profoundly different" on many key points.

The debate was particularly sharp between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. Pacific fleet command and the military command in Saigon, on the one hand, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, CIA and the State Department on the other, over the success of the U.S. bombing campaign.

In its entirety, the response of these groups to the White House questions early in 1969 provides probably the most thorough debates over the effectiveness of air power in specific military situations since the controversy over the World War II strategic bombing survey.

On the use of the B-52s—which have now for the first time been used against targets deep inside North Vietnam—the Pentagon analysis